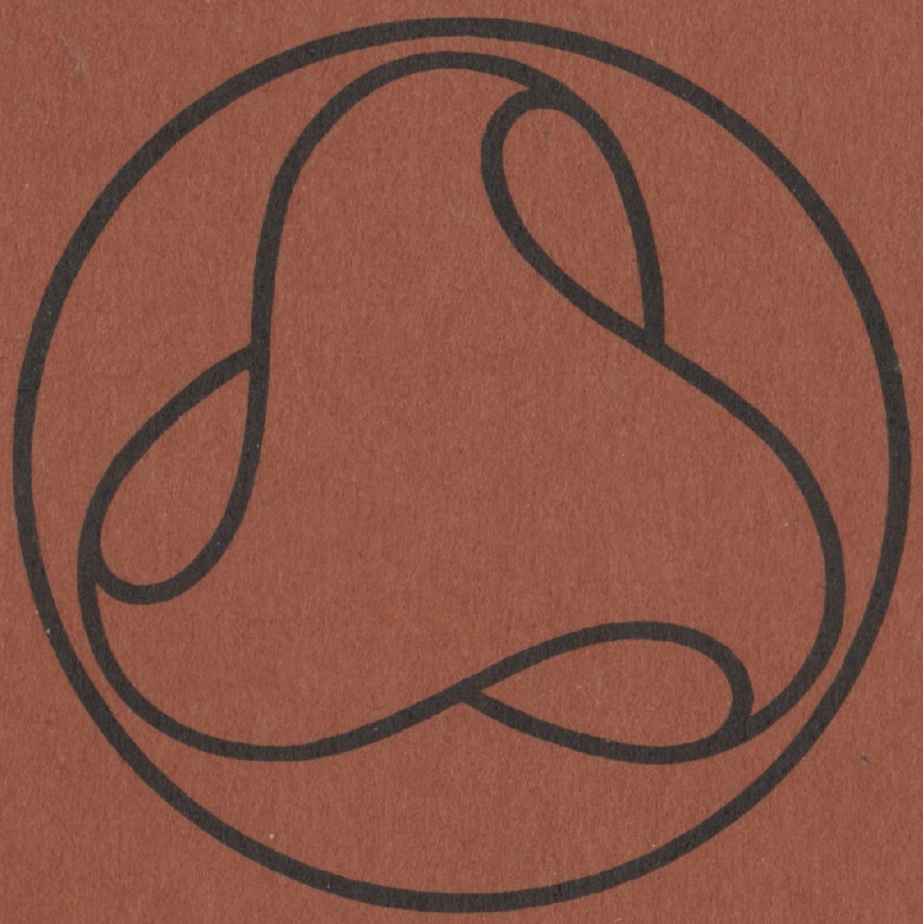
SELF-SUFFICIENT SMALL HOLDING



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SELF-SUFFICIENT SMALL HOLDING

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SELF-SUFFICIENT SMALLHOLDING

FOREWORD

This pamphlet is written to give practical help to those seeking a simple, self-sufficient life. It contains one man's experience on one particular organic smallholding where a certain measure of sufficiency is achieved. I am sure that a family could survive on its own in complete isolation, but this would be a rather uncomfortable and insecure subsistence. Three or four neighbouring smallholders, working in harmony and pooling their individual skills, could live far better. Add a bit of modern technology and life becomes easier, with more leisure-time, less drudgery. The big question is "how self-sufficient does one aim to become?" Today one can choose one's level, seek the best of both worlds . . . only a fool would deliberately make hardships for himself . . . but this option clouds the issue, making it difficult to define one's ultimate, long-term aim. Tomorrow, however, we may well be thrown right back onto our own resources, in which case the question will answer itself. It would seem sensible to be prepared.

No two people are alike, nor are two smallholdings. How I farm in Wales is unlikely to be the ideal system for another farmer elsewhere. But the principles of good soil husbandry, crop growing and animal management are universally the same. I urge the reader to seek the principles that lie behind this account, to crystallise his aim and then to make his plan based on his own holding, skills and personality.

I hope he gets as much fun out of it as I do!

January 1976 S.S.

LAND

The holding is 10 acres of old red sandstone, East-facing on a gentle slope, 550 to 650 feet above sea level.

When we bought the farm in 1972, there were two fields; 6 acres below the house and 3 above. The two had been grazed by horses for some years without control, and the sward was of poor quality with little clover and many thistles and nettles.

Our first task was to divide these fields into six paddocks (see Plate 1). We could then control grazing; an essential factor in grassland improvement and animal health. With these divisions we could also start our arable rotation of cereals and roots, through which, in the course of time, the whole farm might be re-seeded to good herbal leys (see Plate 2).

The remaining acre was half farm-yard and half a jungle of ground-elder, couch and convolvulus, at one time the garden. This we cleared with scythe and sickle until it was possible to keep it down with a rotary mower.

We plan to plant small hardwood groves in corners of the fields, to provide shelter for stock from wind and sun, and as a habitat for birds and small mammals.

We are gradually building up the fertility of the fields, garden and orchard by regular applications of compost into which goes the litter from cow sheds, stable and poultry-house, together with weeds, hedge-trimmings, leaf mould and comfrey. The compost is made by the Indore method and activated by home-made Q.R. starter as formulated by Maye Bruce.

BUILDINGS (see Plate 1)

The principal farm building is a substantial stone and slate cow-byre, erected in 1910, to tie 6 cows with adjoining calf cot, two pig-sties and a garden tool-shed. It was open from floor to roof (which was partly missing) and flooded in wet weather.

Hay and straw could be stored in the old barn; a small pole and corrugated-iron structure, badly placed and no longer sound.

Two rotting pre-fab timber deep-litter houses, a badly designed piggery and a large concrete block shed, all erected in the late 1940s, completed the buildings we took over.

In 1973 we demolished one deep-litter house and re-roofed the other for use as a temporary workshop. The piggery we converted into a hen-house for free-range birds. In 1975 we built a new 3-bay barn of concrete blocks and slate roof, erected loft floors above the cow-shed and calf-cot, re-roofed the cow-shed and pig-sties, converting one into kennels, and concreted the farm-yard.

CROPS (see Plate 2)

Our three-year crop rotation is a variation on the traditional system used on mixed stock farms in upland Wales.

Wheat/rye

Wheat and rye (¼ acre of each) for home milling are autumn-sown by fiddle direct on the inverted sward, which is then harrowed and rolled. In a high-rainfall area, spring-sown cereals, especially wheat, are difficult to harvest fit for milling before the autumn rains set in. The crops are cut by scythe, bound by hand and placed immediately on tripods to dry and harden. If the crops are carted in time, we turn the hens onto the stubbles for up to a fortnight before cultivating with spring tines. We then sow a catch crop of grazing oats or rye to provide an early spring bite for house cow or ewes and lambs. It is often a problem to get the harvest cleared in time to get the catch crop away to a good start whilst the soil is still warm. These crops are threshed by flail at the first opportunity to avoid loss by rats and mice. This is a task for many hands. The rye and wheat straw, normally considered too tough and unpalatable for fodder, is put through that much-neglected machine the chaff cutter and fed to the cattle in autumn and early winter.

Roots

The roots' ground receives a liberal dressing of compost, in February or March, which is ploughed in not more than 4 inches deep. The ground is then cultivated with spring tines and harrows until a good tilth is obtained. It is then ridged, using a single-furrow horse-ridger.

A few rows of main-crop potatoes and ¼ acre of mangolds are sown on the ridge in early May. A single row of peas may also be sown. In late May a double row of main-crop carrots and, in early June, about ¼ acre of swedes, are sown.

All the roots are carefully singled and kept weeded until they are well grown. Our most prolific weeds are fat hen, which composts almost as quickly as comfrey, and nettles. We use both in our compost heaps.

The mangolds are lifted and topped in October before the risk of hard frost. They are left to sweat in piles under their own leaves for 10 days before carting to the clamp. There they are well insulated with straw and remain safe for feeding in March, April and May. The swedes are lifted as needed for cattle in November and December, and, when time permits, the remainder may be clamped for feeding in January and February. Alternatively, they may be grazed *in situ* as they are very frost-hardy.

The weeds, which have been allowed to grow amongst the roots from mid-July, now provide ground cover for the winter and a measure of humus when cultivated in the spring.

Dredge

Dredge corn is a mixture of cereals and pulses, (in our case wheat, oats, barley and peas) which is grown for feeding cattle. The ground (lately in roots) is cultivated in early spring. The cereals are broadcast by fiddle and the peas by hand. These are harrowed in, followed by the herbal ley which is broadcast by fiddle and rolled in.

The crop is cut rather green (but not before the peas are well formed) using a scythe or tractor mower. It is not bound, but put immediately onto a Tyrolean-type three-wire fence where it dries like well-made hay. On the fence it is quite safe (even if wet when put there) until carted. The Tyrolean fence may also be used for hay.

Dredge is fed like hay to the cattle from January to March, some of it having been threshed and rolled for calf feed.

The ley which has grown under the dredge may be lightly grazed in the autumn and is then laid up to provide an early bite for the house cow in March or April, by which time the herbs (mainly chicory) and some self-sown peas make a very succulent feed.

Grass

Three acres of grass are made into hay. The fields are composted (if sufficient is available), harrowed and rolled in mid-April and laid up until cut in early July. The hay is cut with a tractor mower, turned with wooden rakes or Lister Blackstone side rake, put onto tripods and carted loose when ready. In a difficult year it is easier for one man to tripod a field of hay than to load, cart and unload it; furthermore, it can go safely onto tripods at least a day sooner than it can be carted. It may then be carted when convenient. As can be seen from Plate 3 we aim to cut a field for hay one year and graze it the next.

The paddocks are grazed hard by cattle and sheep for 5 days and rested for up to three weeks; thereby improving the sward and reducing the incidence of intestinal worms in the stock.

When time permits, paddocks are topped with a tractor mower two or three times in the season, immediately after grazing, to suppress

thistles and to disperse clumps of coarse grass which become unpalatable to stock.

All grassland is treated with calcinated seaweed at 2 cwt. to the acre once every three years; it has also had one dressing of basic slag at 10 cwt. in 1975, which has already stimulated a remarkable growth of white clover.

LIVESTOCK

Cattle

We keep one spring-calving Jersey house-cow, two X-Hereford nurse cows, and aim to rear their three calves (plus possibly one or more bought-in calves) on the nurse cows, either as dairy replacements or as beef stores. The calves are got by Artificial Insemination.

In summer the cows milk off grass; in winter they are tied in at night and fed on meadow hay, dredge corn, swedes and mangolds. In winter we take in three or four "tack" stores from a neighbour to eat the surplus roots and dredge. They are deep-littered at night and our profit consists of the muck they leave us.

Horses

At the time of writing we have one riding pony now 29 years old. We plan to get a team of "ride and drive" cobs to take over, step by step, first the light and then the heavy work as our old tractor is pensioned off for lack of fuel, (TVO) which is no longer supplied.

Sheep

Our flock of Black Welsh Mountain sheep consists of a ram and 12 ewes. The breed is very prolific, milky and trouble-free. The lambs, born in March, sell fat off their mothers (or are fit for slaughter) from mid-September. Most of our wether lambs are slaughtered privately for our own use or for sale. The skins are cured for hearth rugs, car seats and similar uses.

The black wool does not fetch the top price at the Marketing Board. We therefore arrange to have it carded and spun for our own use and for retail sale.

Poultry

The laying flock consists of about 50 hens of mixed breeds and ages and run completely free-range throughout the year. They are fed mainly on hard corn with a small fish-meal supplement in winter. In summer they are fed whey from the cheese-making. So far we have had to buy mixed corn, which, at current prices, makes the poultry the least economic stock on the farm. My first efforts at breeding our own replacements were not successful because we were unwise in our choice of stock cockerels which suffered from a genetic deficiency causing lack of stamina in their progeny. I have come to the conclusion that poultry-keeping requires great care and attention, and I shall not attempt to increase the flock until I am in a position to get first-class stock and have time to concentrate on selection, breeding and management. It should then be possible to produce a profitable surplus of eggs, table poultry and breeding stock for sale. In spite of this relative failure, the poultry are contributing significantly to the fertility of the farm.

PLATE 1. SKETCH MAP OF THE FARM.

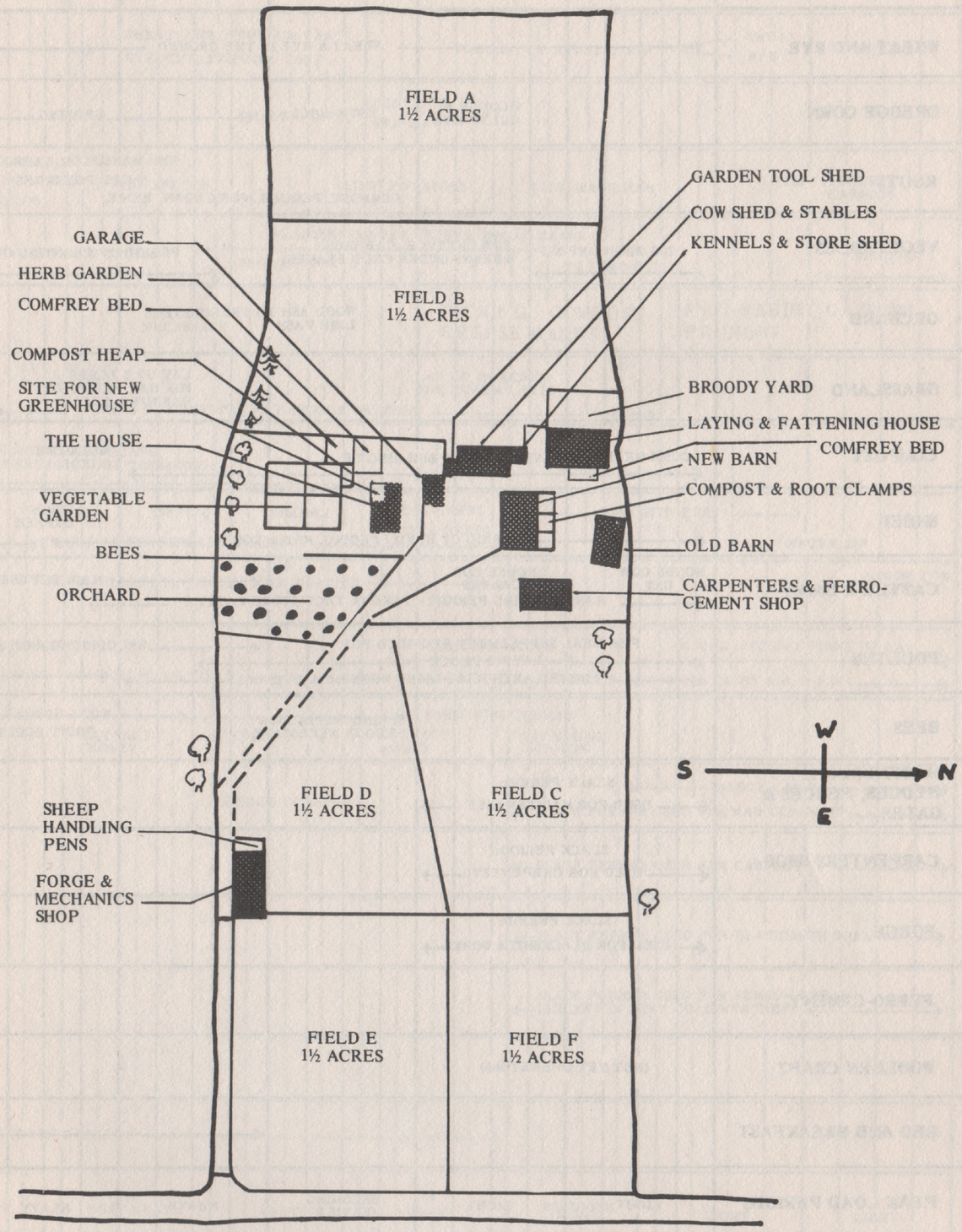
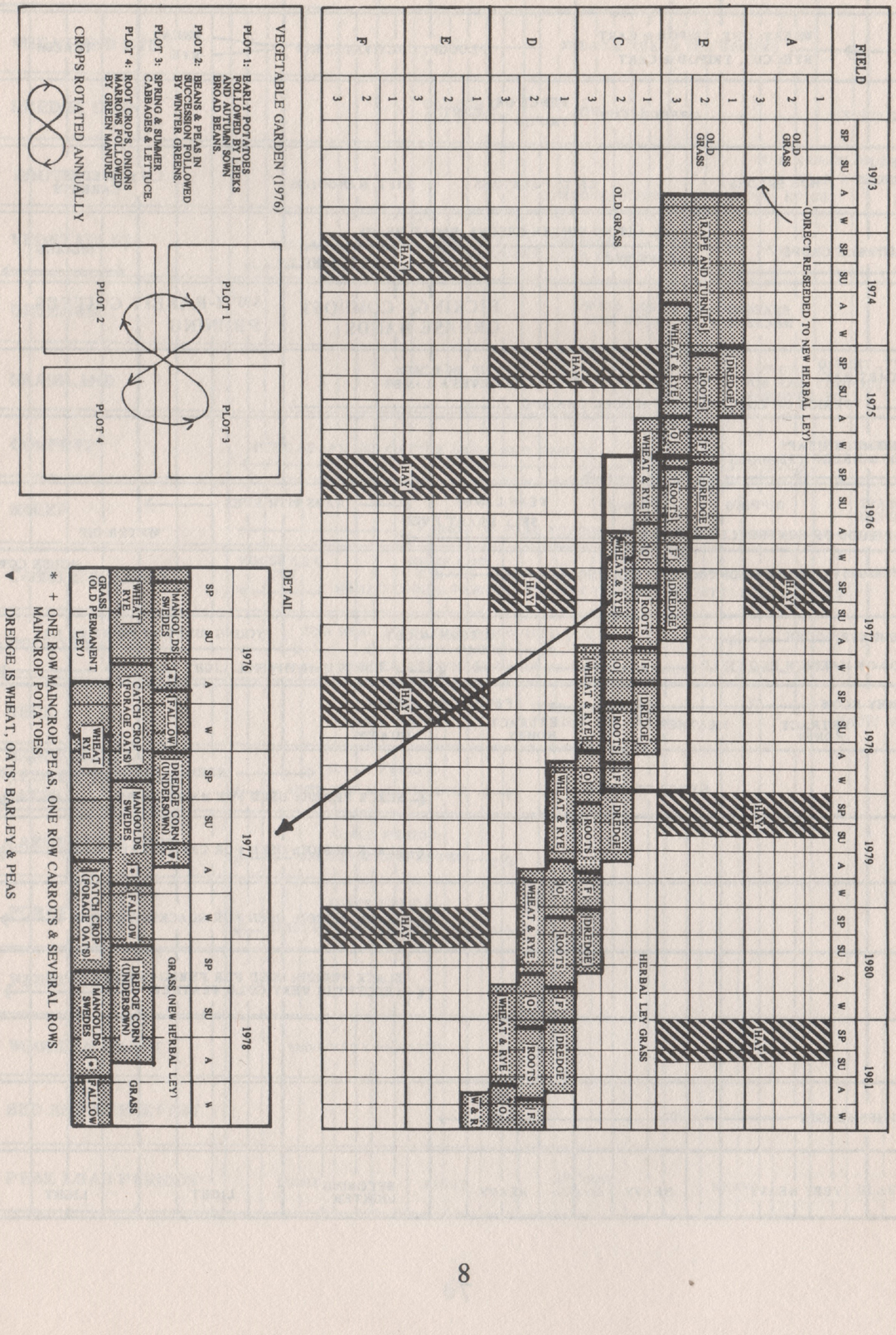


PLATE 2. FARMING YEAR CALENDAR.

	JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
WHEAT AND RYE	← WHEAT & RYE IN THE GROUND →						WHEAT: CUT, TRIPOD & CART RYE: CUT, TRIPOD & CART		PLOUGH, CULTIVATE, SOW		WHEAT RYE	THRESH
DREDGE CORN		PLOUGH & CULTIVATE	SOW, ROLL	←	GROWING →			DREDGE: CUT,	FENCE OR TRIPOD	CART		
ROOTS			COMPOST, PLOUGH, WORK DOWN, RIDGE	SOW: MANGOLDS, CARROTS, SWEDES, PEAS, POTATOES		RIDGE UP POTATOES HOE MANGOLDS	HOE SWEDES		LIFT: POTATOES	LIFT: MANGOLDS		LIFT: SWEDES CARROTS
VEGETABLES	DIG AND COMPOST →	SOW LETTUCE, CABBAGE & BEANS UNDER COLD FRAMES		PERIOD OF PLANTING OUT SUCCESSION VEGETABLE CROPS →				PLANTING WINTER GREENS, BROAD BEANS → HARVESTING,		CLEANING UP		DIGGING →
ORCHARD			WOOD ASH TO TREE ROOTS, LIME WASH				STAKE IF NECESSARY		PICKING, COMPOST GREASE BANDS		ANTI-RABBIT GAITERS PRUNING	
GRASSLAND				LAY UP 3 ACRES FOR HAY, COMPOST HARROW & ROLL		CUT, TRIPOD & CART HAY			LAY UP 1½ ACRES FOR EWES & LAMBS			
COMPOST	DUNG HEAPS AND CATTLE SHEDS BUILDING UP →				MUCK OUT SHEDS	COMPOSTING MUCK HEAPS WITH WEEDS & HEDGE TRIMMINGS →						
SHEEP	← LAMBING PERIOD OF HAND FEEDING, HAY & ROOTS →				SPRING DRENCH	SHEARING	DIPPING PERIOD OF CONTROLLED GRAZING →		WEAN LAMBS ← SELL DRAFT EWES →	RAMS WITH EWES →		WINTER DIP
CATTLE & DAIRY	HOUSE COW DRY ← HAND FEEDING PERIOD; TAKE IN TACK STORE CATTLE →	HOUSE COW CALVES ←			MAIN BUTTER & CHEESE MAKING PERIOD; PERIOD OF CONTROLLED GRAZING →							HOUSE COW DRY
POULTRY	FISH MEAL SUPPLEMENT PROVIDED FOR LAYING FLOCK → ← LIMITED ARTIFICIAL LIGHT MORNING & EVENING →			BROODING PERIOD FOR FLOCK REPLACEMENTS →		PERIOD OF MAXIMUM EGG YIELD →			AUTUMN MOULT →		YOUNG BIRDS AT POINT OF LAY → ← LIMITED ARTIFICIAL LIGHT A.M. & P.M. →	
BEES			SPRING INSPECTION FEED IF NECESSARY	←	FRUIT BLOSSOM HAWTHORN	HONEY FLOW →	EXTRACT HONEY	HEATHER	FEED IF NECESSARY EXTRACT HONEY	FIT MOUSE GUARDS		
MAINTENANCE: HEDGES, FENCES & GATES	← SLACK PERIOD: USED FOR MAINTENANCE →							HEDGE TRIMMING		← HEDGE LAYING → ← SLACK PERIOD: USED FOR MAINTENANCE →		
CARPENTERS SHOP	← SLACK PERIOD: USED FOR CARPENTRY →									← SLACK PERIOD: USED FOR CARPENTRY →		
FORGE	← SLACK PERIOD: USED FOR BLACKSMITH WORK →									← SLACK PERIOD: USED FOR BLACKSMITH WORK →		
FERRO-CEMENT										← SLACK PERIOD: USED FOR FERRO-CEMENT (EXCEPT IN VERY COLD WEATHER) →		
WOOLLEN CRAFT	(NOT YET OPERATING)											
BED AND BREAKFAST				←	MAIN TOURIST SEASON →							
PEAK LOAD PERIODS	LIGHT	LIGHT	BECOMING HEAVIER	HEAVY	HEAVY	HEAVY	VERY HEAVY	HEAVY	HEAVY	BECOMING LIGHTER	LIGHT	LIGHT

PLATE 3. CROP & VEGETABLE ROTATIONS, ARABLE MASTER PLAN.



Bees

We have two colonies of bees and equipment for three. We use scarcely any sugar in the house, yet sometimes we have a little honey surplus for friends or for sale.

The bees are left to look after themselves, but when time permits we plan to build up to three or four colonies.

Quite apart from the honey, the bees are a great asset in the orchard and vegetable garden where good pollination is assured.

VEGETABLES

Our small vegetable garden (including the carrots, peas and maincrop potatoes grown in the roots field) extends to about ¼ acre. The crops are rotated on a four-year cycle (potatoes, pulses, cabbage-family, roots and onions) on a system based partly on the RHS book *The Vegetable Garden Displayed,* and partly on Lawrence Hills's book *Grow your own Fruit and Vegetables.*

Our aim is to provide all-the-year-round fresh vegetables for the house plus a surplus for sale at the farm gate during the summer.

A very small herb garden has been sited near the kitchen and we have plans to build a new greenhouse. To obtain the original tilth and to suppress couch grass and weeds, we double-dug the entire garden. Now, by composting and mulching, we are gradually reducing the amount of digging; this is made still easier by using a Wolf Terex automatic spade, which is an excellent example of intermediate technology.

FRUIT

We inherited the remains of an old orchard from which we saved one pear, one cherry and two apple trees, all in need of drastic pruning and composting. In 1973 we planted a new orchard of 30 assorted apple and two quince trees, and added a Victoria plum and a greengage in 1975.

The roots are kept under a compost mulch and wood ash is added in the spring. No sprays are used, but we limewash the trunks in spring and add grease-bands in the autumn. We also fix gaiters, made from old polythene fertilizer bags (our neighbours have plenty!) around the tree-trunks as protection against rabbits in winter.

MACHINERY AND EQUIPMENT

Our total investment in implements, tools and machinery – including workshops – is less than £2,000.

Our old tractor has but two mounted implements; a three-furrow plough and a mower. The rest are mostly old horse equipment picked up in sales at very low cost. They include a swing-plough, ridger, potato-lifter, spring-tine cultivators, spike and chain harrows, scuffler hoe, slag drill, root drill, side rake, roller, chaff cutter, trailers, winnower, combined rolling and grinding mill and a full set of farm and garden hand tools.

DOMESTIC ECONOMY

Bread

Our wheat and rye are threshed with flails, winnowed and hand-ground in a small stone mill. We bake for our own use only.

Dairy

The cream from the Jersey cow is skimmed and churned twice weekly into butter using an Alfa-Laval stainless steel churn. The skim and butter-milk is made into hard cheese, cottage cheese and yoghurt. The whey from the cheese-making is fed to the chickens. During the summer months we have a considerable surplus of butter, cheese and yoghurt to sell at the farm gate.

MONEY

There is no doubt that we can provide the bulk of our food from the farm, and still have a good surplus to sell. But the surplus farm produce from a 10-acre mixed farm could hardly be expected to pay for the car, central heating, rates, telephone, postage, TV and other luxuries we still enjoy. Some extra income is therefore needed, and the following paragraphs show how we earn it.

BED AND BREAKFAST

During the season from April to September we welcome recommended guests for bed and breakfast at a reasonable charge. In order to remain free to put up our own friends and family whenever we wish, we do not normally accept long-term advance bookings, nor do we cater for lunch or evening meals.

On occasions during the summer my wife runs short courses in bread, butter- and cheese-making, in conjunction with bed-and-breakfast.

We are ideally placed as a base for expeditions in and around a National Park, and many of our guests stay on much longer than they originally planned. They seem to enjoy the simple fare provided almost entirely from the farm.

WORKSHOPS

Carpentry

My carpenters' shop is very well equipped with hand tools as well as an electrically-driven circular saw and bench. Here I can do most repairs and maintenance and also make farm equipment for my own use and for sale. There is a steady demand for cheese presses, cheese moulds, butter workers and scotch hands. The problem here, as with other crafts, is that one cannot charge much for one's labour without pricing the product out of the market. This problem will solve itself as the self-sufficient community develops.

Forge

The forge, not yet in operation, is the complete smithy from a nearby village which I acquired when the late smith retired some years

ago. In it I shall be able to do most of my own implement repairs, make new tools and equipment to my own design, and, when time permits, do work for others.

Ferro-cement

Ferro-cement is a relatively new technique of light section, reinforced cement mortar construction which can be adapted to many items of farm equipment. The materials are very cheap and easy to obtain and the medium lends itself to forming quite complicated shapes without the need for expensive tools and equipment. I hope to develop this craft for the manufacture of self-sufficiency farm equipment.

THEME OF THE YEAR

Since taking on the farm I have tried to concentrate on one or more special themes each year. In 1973/4 it was FENCES AND GATES to control grazing; in 1974/5 BUILDINGS, WATER SUPPLY AND DRAINAGE and in 1975/6 BETTER TILTH. 1976/7 is the year for BETTER COMPOST. In 1977/8 I hope to tackle POULTRY and possibly introduce WORKING HORSES.

CONCLUSION

On our smallholding we are trying to learn the rudiments of all the skills required for complete self-sufficiency. It must be obvious to the reader that we are biting off more than we can chew. But we have done this quite deliberately in the belief that others would take up self-sufficiency nearby. This is now happening and gradually the specialised skills are being-shared with neighbours, and the *group rather than the individual* is becoming the self-sufficient unit.

APPENDIX

THE DISCIPLINE OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY

A growing number of people are opting out of our industrial-economic society in the hope of finding a new and truer life of self-sufficiency on the land. The failure rate is high, almost always the result of inexperience and lack of the very considerable skills needed to produce with certainty the wide range of products necessary for survival. Our people have become soft and are daunted by the hardship that their grandparents accepted as normal.

A century ago a peasant child grew up on the land and learned the skills by his father's side. By the age of 12 the rhythm of farm life was part of him, and by 15 he could tackle practically every job on the holding. He accepted the hardships and the joys of subsistence husbandry *because he had no option.* Today our would-be small-holder jumps in at the deep end with the soft option of the welfare state waiting to rescue him if he fails to swim.

Self-sufficiency farming is not new, nor is it black magic. Any sensible, healthy person can do it if he goes about it properly, has the determination to resist the soft option when the going gets tough and the capital to acquire enough good land, stock and equipment and to tide him over the inevitable lean years.

I believe the following ten factors are essential to success:

1. **INCENTIVE** which grows from a realisation of the true state of the world. We must learn to survive the coming storm or go under. It may not be long before the "soft option" no longer exists.

2. **A CLEAR AIM** in my case to build a prototype "ark" which can ride out the coming flood.

3. **SENSIBLE PRIORITIES** in my case as follows:
   (a) To build up a mixed farming system to produce the essentials of life.
   (b) To earn the cash to pay for the "extras" whilst they remain available.
   (c) To learn the subsidiary skills (woollen craft, carpentry, blacksmithing, milling, pottery, methane gas production etc.) so that we can become completely independent when the need arises.
   (d) When well established, to make our experience available to others.

4. **DISCIPLINE** is necessary in every aspect of the project:
   (a) To acquire the habit of strict frugality *before* it is forced on us.
   (b) To keep really fit for the long hours and heavy work.
   (c) To keep mentally fit to hold on to our aims and priorities when the 'soft option' beckons.
   (d) To acquire the skills necessary for every facet of the work.

5. **HARD, LONG HOURS** are inescapable, particularly when building up the farm and acquiring the essential skills. The alternative is to accept third-rate results which, I feel, are the certain path to failure. One must learn to find recreation in the ever-changing work and rhythm of the seasons. More leisure should be possible later when the project is running well and one has achieved full co-operation with like-minded neighbours.

6. **SKILL** Self-sufficiency farming probably requires more mental and manual skills than most other callings. In olden times children learned their skills at their parents' knee, but now we have a whole new generation of young people divorced from the land and its traditional crafts. They have to learn from scratch; just like tackling a foreign language; one cannot expect fluency to come quickly to an older person.

7. **EXPERIENCE** comes only with time, and I would suggest that an inexperienced youngster would be unwise to attempt subsistence farming until he has spent two years working on a good mixed farm. Let him make his initial mistakes at his mentor's expense!. .

8. **GOOD HEALTH** is God's potential gift to most people, but it is up to every one of us to develop it to the full. Strength, agility, vigour and endurance do not just happen, but require training, discipline and proper food.

9. **LUCK** Success and failure are twin brothers that walk hand-in-hand the whole time. Luck can change triumph to disaster in a twinkling, and this will happen again and again throughout a farmer's progress. Much that is put down to bad luck may really be lack of skill, experience or discipline; but in the end we all need a great measure of good luck.

10. **DETERMINATION AND FAITH** can turn defeat into victory, and these, in the long-run, are probably the most important factors of all.

So, let us go forward with our eyes wide open, our feet on the ground and remember the old Chinese proverb *"what one fool can do, another can"*.

THE SOIL ASSOCIATION LTD.

President: Lord O'Hagan

A world wide charity, founded in 1946, to promote a fuller understanding of the vital relationship between soil, plant, animal and man. The Association believes that these are parts of one whole, and that nutrition derived from a balanced living soil is the greatest single contribution to health (wholeness). For this reason it encourages an ecological approach and offers organic husbandry as a viable alternative to modern intensive methods.

Current activities of the Association are:

To promote organic husbandry as a viable alternative to modern intensive methods.

To assist farmers, horticulturists and gardeners who wish to adopt organic methods.

To conduct courses on the principles and practices of organic husbandry as part of its expanding educational programme.

To publish basic information on organic practice to support this programme.

To take part in conferences, exhibitions, agricultural and horticultural shows in order to demonstrate the advantages of organic methods.

To provide qualified speakers.

To publish a Quarterly Review free to members and to provide a comprehensive bookshop service.

The Association is supported by active Groups throughout the United Kingdom.

The Association has published a code governing methods of organic production to the highest quality. The Association has its own registered trademark which it issues on licence to growers who conform strictly to this code. This trademark on any produce for sale is a sign of its high organic quality.

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